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General Assembly

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Official Records

105th plenary meeting
Thursday, 23 June 2005, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Ping ..... (Gabon)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Informal Interactive Hearings of the General Assembly with representatives of non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector

The President (*spoke in French*): I declare open the Informal Interactive Hearings of the General Assembly with representatives of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, civil society organizations and the private sector.

The Hearings will be held today and tomorrow, 23 and 24 June 2005, in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 59/145 of 17 December 2004, 59/291 of 15 April 2005 and 59/293 of 27 May 2005. They will consist of this opening plenary meeting, followed by four sequential informal interactive sessions, including the closing of the Hearings. The programme of the Hearings is announced in the *Journal* of the United Nations.

The themes for the Hearings will be based on the comprehensive report of the Secretary-General, contained in document A/59/2005, and the clusters defined therein. All issues regarding financing for development will also be discussed during the informal interactive sessions.

Statement by the President

The President (*spoke in French*): I should like to emphasize that this is the first time that the General Assembly has organized such hearings as today's. This is therefore an excellent opportunity to pursue dialogue among the Member States, non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector, which the Cardoso report rightly indicates play a key role, particularly in meeting the challenges and threats facing the world.

I take this opportunity to welcome the many representatives of non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector who are among us this morning. I also welcome the seriousness, devotion and sense of responsibility shown by the representatives of those organizations within the task force I established to assist me in preparing for these Hearings.

The massive presence of non-governmental, civil society and private sector organizations at these hearings shows their particular interest in this process, even if — as one might suspect — such a great number of participants made the selection process somewhat more delicate.

Despite the informal nature of these Hearings, as was desired by the General Assembly, I have encouraged Member States to participate actively. Therefore, I am pleased to see that they have responded favourably to that appeal and have made themselves available.

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As participants are aware, the main purpose of these Hearings is to obtain the contributions of representatives of non-governmental, civil society and private sector organizations with a view to the High-level Plenary Meeting to be held in September 2005. That is why they will be held on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General entitled "In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all" (A/59/2005).

It is therefore my earnest hope that these Hearings will serve as the framework for a fruitful dialogue. Following the Hearings, I shall prepare a report that will be published as an official document of the General Assembly. I am convinced that it will make a significant contribution to the deliberations of Member States with a view to the September High-level Plenary Meeting.

In conclusion, I should like to emphasize the fact that non-governmental, civil society and private sector organizations are essential components of our respective nations. In many respects, what they do supplements the activities of States, with whom they are true partners. Thus, they participate in the collective development of our societies.

Therefore, we look forward to their proposals, within the framework of these hearings, on how to address the major problems faced by humanity so that we can chart our common future. That is why I sincerely hope that a dialogue between Member States and civil society, as we will have for the next two days, will henceforward become a regular feature of the General Assembly.

I now call on the Deputy Secretary-General, Ms. Louise Fréchette.

The Deputy Secretary-General: Good morning, everyone. I welcome you very warmly to the United Nations. The Secretary-General is currently travelling, but he intends to join you briefly tomorrow.

The presence of so many representatives of civil society, of non-governmental organizations and of the private sector in the General Assembly Hall is important for two reasons. Let me begin with the first.

The process under way this year will be decisive for the future of the United Nations. Two years ago, the Secretary-General said that the United Nations had come to a fork in the road. Recent events had called into question the consensus behind the shared vision expressed in the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted at the Millennium Summit, held here in this Hall in the year 2000.

As the Secretary-General pointed out, humanity is faced with a range of threats and challenges to its security, from the risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and trafficking in small arms to the spread of infectious diseases and poverty — the latter being the biggest threats to the majority of people on this planet. We face a choice: come together to tackle those challenges collectively, or risk increased tension, disorder and inequality.

In the past several months, a great deal of thinking has been done on those issues. The report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (A/59/565) and the report of the Millennium Project, to which many of you brought your own ideas and contributions, have offered very thoughtful analysis of the challenges of our time as well as bold, yet practical, proposals on how to deal with them.

The Secretary-General's own report, "In larger freedom", brought all of that thinking together. It underlined in particular the interconnected nature of the challenges facing us. The report made clear that development, security and human rights not only are ends in themselves, but also that they reinforce and depend on one another. In our interconnected world, the human family will not enjoy development without security, it will not enjoy security without development, and it will not enjoy either without respect for human rights. This year offers an opportunity to address all those linked challenges at once.

Now we are entering the most crucial phase of the 2005 process — the phase in which Governments have to decide on the way forward. A few weeks ago, the President of the General Assembly submitted a draft outcome document for the world summit that will be held here in September, and Member States have just begun negotiations to reach agreement on that final outcome.

The issues on the table are of relevance to every human being on the planet. If the summit in September takes decisions that help strengthen our collective security, if we make real progress in our fight against poverty, disease and illiteracy, if the world provides the means to reach the Millennium Development Goals and if Governments recognize the centrality of human rights and reform the United Nations to ensure it is up to the job it has to do, then all the world's people will benefit.

In that process, your voices must continue to be heard. Your contributions to our debate and your expertise — often based on direct experience on the ground — bring the perspectives of engaged citizens, grass-roots organizations and communities.

That brings me to the second reason why the presence of civil society here is so important. These Hearings represent a significant new step in the way the United Nations interacts with civil society. We have a long history of working together, and your contributions have taken many forms. Most major United Nations meetings are occasions for non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector to come together to participate in parallel events such as round tables and workshops. And we are, of course, partners in the implementation of humanitarian and development projects all over the world.

These Hearings take that interaction a step further. Through a decision of the General Assembly, time has been reserved in its formal deliberative process to hear the views of civil society in an organized fashion. The fact that the President of the General Assembly is himself chairing these Hearings is an indication of the importance Member States attach to these two days.

I hope that the format will be used again as part of the General Assembly's overall efforts to open up and interact much more with non-State actors. As many of you know, that recommendation was advanced by the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations, chaired by Mr. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil. The Secretary-General subsequently recommended that the first step be held in preparation for the Summit. Let us hope that that is the shape of things to come.

Finally, I would like to thank the Governments of Canada, Finland and Norway for their generous contributions to the trust fund set up to support participation by developing country civil society representatives in these hearings.

Above all, let me thank each and every one of you for your commitment. I hope you will keep making that commitment felt here at the United Nations and out there in the world. I wish you all a very productive two-day session.

The President (*spoke in French*): I should like to recall that, in my letter dated 21 June 2005, transmitted to all Member States, I proposed that we would also hear at this meeting a statement by a representative of non-governmental and civil society organizations and the private sector. I further proposed that Ms. Renate Bloem, President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, be the representative of those three groups to make a statement at this meeting.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to invite Ms. Renate Bloem, President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, to make a statement at this meeting?

It was so decided.

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to the President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, Ms. Renate Bloem.

Ms. Bloem (Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations): I would like to stress that, against all odds, and despite the technical problems, today is a historic moment: for the first time since the founding of the United Nations, the General Assembly is holding hearings with civil society and the private sector. These Hearings represent a significant step forward for the United Nations itself and for all of us in civil society, which, overall, is a constant supporter of the principles of the United Nations and of multilateralism.

My own emotions are strong, since the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has for 57 years worked intensively to enhance the participation of civil society in United Nations forums.

This moment has been long awaited by NGOs that have advocated for decades to have a special relationship with the General Assembly, the highest deliberative body of the Organization. Our appeal has been heard by the Secretary-General himself, who, in his report entitled "In larger freedom", which followed the Cardoso report (A/58/817), agrees that "the goals of the United Nations can only be achieved if civil society and Governments are fully engaged" (*A/59/2005, para. 162*) and that prior to major events, the Assembly could institute the practice of holding interactive hearings between Member States and civil society representatives that have the necessary expertise on the issues on the agenda. That moment has

now come, and I welcome all Governments that are here to interact with us.

The summit in September will, indeed, constitute a major event and will take place in this very Hall. The seats will be occupied by world leaders, who have the capacity to make decisions that will not only affect the future of the United Nations, but also determine the kind of world that we and our children will be living in. It is time for all of us to speak up for what we believe in, and for the voices of the world's peoples — particularly women, youth, the elderly and indigenous peoples — to be heard. Our backgrounds, traditions, interests and values are very diverse, but we share a profound conviction that the United Nations is essential and that its effectiveness depends on giving operational reality, in all of its programmes, to the interdependence of development, security and human rights.

Today is, indeed, a crucial moment in history, but it builds on a long history of growing interaction between Governments and civil society. The founders of the United Nations themselves granted to NGOs, through Article 71 of the Charter, a consultative relationship with the Economic and Social Council. When, on 26 June, we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the signing of the Charter of the United Nations, we will mark the evolution of international relations and the emergence of a global civil society, which, now as never before, rallies around the Millennium Development Goals and the campaign and global call for action against poverty.

So it is vital that Member States listen to those voices, and we are grateful to you, Mr. President, and to the Deputy Secretary-General for your leadership in making that happen. However, the September meetings of the General Assembly are very close, and these Hearings constitute one of the last opportunities for our input to be taken into consideration.

Representatives of NGOs, civil society and the private sector have come prepared to offer their ideas and recommendations, often based on first-hand experience of the issues that they are going to address on poverty and development, human rights, peace and security and the need to shape a more democratic system of global governance by reforming and strengthening the United Nations. This civil society experience and competence with regard to real-world issues is surely what led the Cardoso Panel on United Nations-Civil Society Relations to call for greater integration of civil society viewpoints at all levels of United Nations policy discussions. Civil society input enhances Government output.

We thus hope that in 2005 our voices will not only be heard, but listened to, so that we may have a substantive impact on the document to be submitted to the summit in September. We have the draft of the document in hand, and we are therefore in a position to assess the extent to which our contributions to the negotiations are valued by Member States. We shall be watching very closely to see the extend to which our recommendations are reflected in the final document.

Let me also express the hope that the Hearings will not constitute an isolated event, but that they will help us to move from a historical precedent to a more formal, institutionalized way for civil society to interact with the work of the General Assembly. We think that the Hearings are a very good beginning; they could be repeated at the start of each General Assembly session.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to you, Mr. President, for having set up a civil society task force to assist you in preparing for the Hearings and to thank the members of the task force for the tremendous amount of work that they have done in a very short time.

We have come to a point in time where partnerships between Governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector are not a mere option any more — to rephrase another very famous phrase — but a vital necessity for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

We are entering a new era when Governments and civil society must work hand in hand to relegate wars, poverty and violations of human rights to the dustbin of history. That is the new millennium that the world needs.

The President (*spoke in French*): The Informal Interactive Hearings on freedom to live in dignity will be held in the Economic and Social Council Chamber immediately following the adjournment of this plenary meeting.

The meeting rose at 10.50 a.m.